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Editorial

THE MODERNISM OF THE OLD TESTAMENT

THE MAKERS OF THE OLD TESTAMENT

The Christian public has so long been accustomed to the existence and use of the Bible, that it is difficult for the average man to put himself, even in imagination, back into the time before the Bible came into being. Yet there was true religion even then. The Old Testament was the product of religion, not its producer. It was primarily effect, not cause. Holy men in times past spake as they were moved by the Holy Spirit, and a partial result was the Old Testament. But the good men preceded the good Book, and the latter would have been impossible apart from the former.

The prophets of Israel had no Bible. They made Scripture as they went along. Their mighty sermons were not expositions of texts, but interpretations of life. Never in Israel was religious progress made with such rapidity and splendor as under their guidance. Whence came the materials of their preaching? In part, from the past history of their nation, preserved for them in more or less incomplete form in the traditions handed down by the fathers from age to age. But in far larger part, from a contemplation of the seething world of their own day. They brooded over its problems; they experienced its suffering; they rebuked its sins; they appreciated its aspirations; they voiced its deepest longings, and formulated its unspoken ideals. They conceived their task to be that of interpreting the world from Jehovah's point of view. They sought to vindicate the supreme place of religion in life. They strove to give the world religious meaning and value. They faced the world with convictions about God and righteousness and by faith they overcame the world.

Notwithstanding apparently insuperable obstacles, they claimed the world for God, and made good their claim to the satisfaction of the faithful.

THE OLD TESTAMENT A RECORD OF ISRAEL'S RELIGIOUS
EXPERIENCE

The Old Testament contains the substance of their teachings and those of their successors. It constitutes thus the record of Israel's choicest religious experience through a period of approximately one thousand years. As "the thoughts of men are widened with the process of the suns," so Israel's religious needs changed from age to age. She was brought into closer and closer contact with the great world-powers. Her horizon was consequently widened economically, politically, intellectually. The simple life of the nomad became more and more complex with every decade. The currents and counter-currents of oriental civilization brought enrichment to Israel on every hand. The naïve simplicity and wonder of the child gave place to the maturity and wisdom of the full-grown man. Narrow provincialism was compelled by circumstances to make way for world-views. Religion and theology must needs keep pace with the advance along other lines. Clarity of vision in things secular cannot long go hand in hand with obscurantism in things religious. The task of Israel's religious leaders, therefore, was to keep Israel's religious consciousness up to date. The Old Testament is the record of their response to Israel's ever-changing religious needs.

This record clearly shows that Israel's thinkers were not in bondage to tradition. They faced the problems of their times as free men. They did not disdain to learn from the past, indeed; but, on the contrary, strove to conserve all that was good in their heritage. Yet they hesitated not to break with the past when necessary to the maintenance of the vitality of their religion. Ideas that had had their day were cast aside to make room for new ones when advancing knowledge and deepening experience showed them to be no longer tenable. Many examples of such procedure are afforded in the pages of the Old Testament. The narrative in Samuel represents Jehovah as having moved David to take a census of Israel for which he then afflicts Israel with a deadly plague. But the teaching that Jehovah

punished Israel for having committed a sin to which he himself had incited their king proved incompatible with the growing ethical sense of Israel. Hence in the Chronicler's narrative, which assumed form centuries later, the initial impulse toward the census is traced back to Satan rather than to Jehovah. Jehu's slaughter of the adherents of Baal received the enthusiastic indorsement of the zealous Jehovah-worshippers contemporary with him; but a later age, revolting against such bloodthirsty measures even in behalf of the true religion, voices its protest in the judgment pronounced upon the house of Jehu for this act by the prophet Hosea. The doctrine of the inviolability of Jerusalem as the city of Jehovah's sanctuary, which in Isaiah's hands did good service in behalf of courage and faith, is unsparingly denounced by Jeremiah as a fetish destructive of all real spiritual and ethical religion. The teaching that all suffering and calamity are due to sin, is one upon which great stress was laid by the prophets, together with many of the psalmists as well as the sages who gathered the Book of Proverbs. This doctrine is directly and forcefully attacked in the Book of Job, where whatever else may or may not be taught, it is at least shown that piety and prosperity are not interchangeable terms. Thus the teachers of Israel met the questions of the times untrammelled by the fetters of the past. Loyal to the spirit of their predecessors and profiting immeasurably by their rich experiences, they set about their work with zeal and courage confident that the God who had guided, stimulated, and strengthened the fathers would not fail their children in the time of need. He who had spoken in the past was equally ready to speak in the present, for was he not the ever-living God and ever-loving Father?

THE BIBLE AND THE MODERN WORLD

Herein lies food for thought. Is not the Old Testament attitude toward the past with its treasures and the present with its problems the right one even yet? Is not the task of today essentially the task of all time, past, present, and future? We have our world to which we must give religious value even as the prophets found it for theirs. Are not the raw materials of our religious evaluation the same in essence as theirs—a heritage from the experience of our predecessors plus the contents of our own distinctive experience? Others have

labored and we have entered into their labors. We have a goodly heritage. The treasures of experience stored up for our use have never before been equaled. But this surely does not excuse us from the obligation to add to our inheritance and to pass it on enhanced in value to our successors. The achievements of the past must not lie like leaden weights upon the spirit of the present, but must lend wings to thought and give eager expectancy to life.

Is not all this true of religion in general and of the Bible in particular? The religious experience of the past, whether inside or outside of the Bible, is of value to us in proportion as we can reaffirm it in our own experience and supplement it from our own life. We must come in contact with the great realities of life for ourselves directly and immediately. We cannot live upon the experience of others, no matter how great and good they may have been. Not even Scripture may absolve us from the necessity of thinking our way to God for ourselves. It may indicate for us the way which our fathers trod, but we must tread it too. It may give us their interpretation of their world, but we must interpret our own world. This is the ever-present task of faith. Such contact with reality is death to hypocrisy and cant. Only so are genuine enthusiasm and serious devotion to the interests of the kingdom of God within our reach.

Shall we then cast aside our Bibles? God forbid! As well might the philosopher discard the long history of human thought and attempt to start *de novo*, or the mariner burn his maps and charts and smash his compass. Here is an invaluable record of man's search after God and of his progress toward the ever-receding goal of ideal manhood. Here is inspiration and hope for all succeeding generations. As our forefathers hurled themselves into the struggle in behalf of truth, righteousness, and God, so will we. As they won their triumphs in the strength of God, so shall we. As they treasured the records of the experience of their predecessors as their most precious possession, so will we in turn treasure theirs and hand on to our children, if God will, an enriched inheritance.